



Teresia Hazen: Helping Patients Recover through Gardening

by Mary Yee

LEGACY HEALTH is a large network of five hospitals and related healthcare facilities in Oregon where many of its critical-care/long-term care patients are fortunate to have the opportunity to leave their sterile rooms for a respite with nature just steps away on the hospital's grounds. Here patients and visitors will find shade trees, perennial borders, raised beds filled with herbs and vegetables, sitting areas for resting—and a healing influence no pill or surgery can provide. “A garden should be a place of peace for restoration,” says Teresia Hazen, a registered horticultural therapist and Legacy’s coordinator of therapeutic gardens and horticultural therapy. “The beauty of having the gardens at the hospitals is that they are available to the patients 24/7 so they can go out any time to relax or find solace. There are about 9,000 employees in the Legacy system, and hospital staff also use and benefit from the gardens.”



Hazen helped develop nine therapeutic gardens at several Legacy treatment centers. Three gardens have received design awards from the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA). In 2007, the American Horticultural Society recognized Hazen’s contributions to her field with its Horticultural Therapy Award. Hazen is also an instructor for the horticultural therapy certificate program at Legacy and the healthcare garden-design certificate program at Chicago Botanic Garden in Illinois.

Managing Editor and Art Director Mary Yee talked to Hazen about the important role gardening can play in healthcare and horticultural therapy as an emerging profession. (For more about therapeutic gardens, see the article “Gardens for Recovery” in the November/December 2009 issue of *The American Gardener*.)

Mary Yee: How did you get into horticultural therapy?

Teresia Hazen: I grew up in a family of 10 on a 120-acre farm in southeastern Washington, so I have always enjoyed working with people and gardening. I started my career in education, including special education, but after 20 years in the field I took a break to pursue classes in horticulture. I had never heard of horticultural therapy (HT) until 1989, when I came across an article about it in a professional journal. I was so inspired that I started to do private consulting at nursing homes almost immediately, and I was hired by Legacy in 1991.

What is your role at Legacy?

As a horticultural therapist, I work as part of a rehabilitation team with physicians, nurses, physical therapists, and others to meet the treatment goals of individual

patients using gardening techniques.

As the coordinator of therapeutic gardens at Legacy, I work with healthcare experts and landscape designers to facilitate the creation of gardens at the hospitals that will address the needs of our patients. For instance, none of our patients can bend to the ground to garden, so we incorporate raised beds in the designs to bring the garden up to them. I also manage the ongoing care of all the gardens.

Is gardening an effective form of therapy for all patients?

Gardening is a good toolbox for rehabilitation. Of course, before we start any treatment, we always ask the patients to make sure they are interested in gardening. Most people are in some way—if they are not gardeners, they might be nature lovers, weekend hikers, or birdwatchers.

Even if a patient doesn’t garden, documented studies have shown that after just three minutes of *being* in a well-designed therapeutic garden, patients experience positive changes in mood and show measurable physiological reductions in stress—without having to do anything.

Can you give some examples of how gardening is used for therapy?

I worked with a group of stroke patients recently who had problems with memory and sequencing thoughts. To address the goal of memory improvement, I showed the patients how to plant basil seeds indoors in pots. This exercise challenged the patients to remember the steps I demonstrated, then each person took turns planting the seeds.

Another patient I am working with had a stroke that caused his left side to be weak

and impaired his attention span. Because he still needs a wheelchair, I have him plant annuals in a raised bed while sitting to strengthen his left arm and begin coordinating both arms to work together again. At the same time, he is practicing focusing his attention on the task. As his balance improves, he will perform the same tasks from a standing position to continue developing his balance. These are skills the patient can use at home after he has been discharged from the hospital.



Horticultural therapist Teresia Hazen shows a stroke patient how to use a hand trowel to plant marigolds in a raised bed at one of Legacy's therapeutic gardens.

How are the therapeutic gardens at the Legacy facilities maintained?

Both paid gardening staff and many trained volunteers contribute to the care of the gardens. It is essential for our patients that the gardens engage and stimulate all their senses, so we are always planting in order to keep the gardens botanically rich and looking fresh year round. This also gives me a chance to try out some of the interesting new plants I read about in gardening magazines!

HT is still a developing therapeutic field. Can you tell us about some of your efforts to advance it as a profession?

Interest in HT has been increasing—especially as the senior population continues to grow—but at the present time a person doesn't need credentials to be a horticultural therapist. Since 2008, the AHTA has

begun requiring a four-year degree and all training as college-transcribed coursework to receive AHTA credentials. I have been a part of developing and teaching two programs for training horticultural therapy professionals—one at Portland Community College (PCC) and one for Oregon State University (OSU).

The PCC gerontology program offers the six-course therapeutic horticulture series required by the AHTA for registration, as well as an option for earning an HT cer-

tificate. OSU students can take these courses at a Legacy facility as part of a new four-year HT degree.

Because HT is a newer field in some parts of the world than it is here, I have also been fortunate to have been invited to countries such as China, Japan, and Britain to share my knowledge with fellow caregivers. This fall, I will be at a large geriatric hospital in Paris for a day to teach the staff how to integrate gardening techniques into patient treatment plans.

Are you working on any new projects?

We are at about 80 percent of needed funds to begin building our newest garden at Meridian Park Medical Center. We are hoping to break ground this summer. ☺

Mary Yee is Managing Editor and Art Director of The American Gardener.

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